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Psalm 51— Logotechnical Analysis

Guidelines

- Please read the [General Introduction](#) as well as the Introduction to [Book I](#) and [Book II](#).
- For common features found in the numerical analysis charts, see the "[Key to the charts](#)".

Specific features of Psalm 51

- This is the first poem in a series of 7 closely coherent Davidic psalms (51-57) in Book II, having together exactly **104** (4 x **26**) verselines, followed by another series of 8 (58-65), likewise with **104** verselines. For particulars see the Introduction to Book II, Table VI.
- The significant 12-word heading explains the situation in which this prayer of contrition is supposed to have originated: David's sin and crime in connection with Bathsheba.
- The psalm lacks a meaningful centre on word level; instead, like Psalm 50, it has one in terms of the poetic building blocks: the two middle cola in [v. 12](#). As in quite a number of psalms, an important section of the poem has its own meaningful centre, which is to be found in Canto I: the striking keyword **חַטָּאתִי**, 'I have sinned', in [v. 6a](#) (42 = 21 + 1 + 21).
- Particularly ingenious is the use of the number **7** in various ways to express the idea of the 'fullness' of the guilt and contrition of the speaker in the prayer.

Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza boundary: || Canticle boundary: |

- Van der Lugt: 3-5 | 6, 7-8 || 9-11, 12-14 || 15-17 | 18-19, 20-21 (3 cantos - of which the first and third divide into two canticles - with 8 strophes, 20 verselines and 42 cola).
- Fokkelman: 3-5, 6 || 7-8, 9-11 || 12-13 || 14-15, 16-17 || 18-19, 20-21 (5 stanzas, 9 strophes, 20 verselines and 42 cola).
- Labuschagne: 3-5 | 6, 7-8 || 9-11, 12-14 || 15, 16-17 | 18-19 | 20-21 (3 cantos with 9 strophes, 20 verselines and 42 cola, taking vs. 20-21 as a coda).

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: framework; **d**: central section: prayer for purification and restoration.
- The numbering of the verselines is shown in **brown**.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	לְמִנְצַח מְזִמּוֹר לְדָוִד:	3	3			
2	בָּבוֹא־אֵלָיו נָתַן הַנְּבִיא־	4	4			
	כְּאֲשֶׁר־בָּא אֶל־בֶּת־שֶׁבַע:	5		5		
	Heading, v. 1-2	12	= 7	+ 5		
3	חַנּוּנִי אֱלֹהִים כְּחֶסֶד־ךָ	3	3		3	
	כָּל־ב רַחֲמֶיךָ מִחַת פֶּשְׁעִי:	4		4	4	
	Total, v. 3	7	= 3	+ 4	= 7	+ 0
4	הִרְבֵּה כְּפִסְנִי מִעֲוֹנָי	3	3		3	
	וַיִּמְחַטָּאתִי טְהַרֵּנִי:	2		2	2	
	Total, v. 4	5	= 3	+ 2	= 5	+ 0
5	כִּי־פֶשְׁעִי אָנִי אֲדַע־	4	4		4	
	וַיִּמְחַטָּאתִי נִגְדֵי תִמְדִּי:	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 5	7	= 4	+ 3	= 7	+ 0
	Canticle I.1 Strophe 1 Total, v. 3-5	19	= 10	+ 9	= 19	+ 0

6	Middle word of Canto I: חֲטָאֲתָן ³	4	3	3	3
	וְהָרַע בְּעֵינָיו עֲשִׂיתִי		3	3	3
	43 = 21 + 1 + 21		3	3	3
	within its middle verseline	5	3	3	3
	v. 6a-b (7 = 3 + 1 + 3)		2	2	2
	Strophe 2	Total, v. 6	11	= 11	+ 0 = 11 + 0
7	הֵן-בְּעוֹזֵן חוֹלְלֵתִי	6	3	3	3
	וּבְחָטָא יַחֲמֹתֵנִי אָמִי ⁴		3	3	3
	Total, v. 7		6	= 3	+ 3 = 6 + 0
8	הֵן-אָמַת חֲפָצָת בְּטָחוֹתִי	7	4	4	4
	וּבִקְסָתָם חֲכָמָה תוֹדִיעֵנִי:		3	3	3
	Total, v. 8		7	= 4	+ 3 = 7 + 0
	Strophe 3	Total, v. 7-8	13	= 7	+ 6 = 13 + 0
	Canticle I.2	Total, v. 6-8	24	= 18	+ 6 = 24 + 0
	Canto I	Total, v. 3-8	43	= 28	+ 15 = 43 + 0
9	Initial word of Canto II תַּחֲטָאֲנִי ⁵ בְּאִזּוֹב וְאֶתְהַרֵּא	8	3	3	3
	תִּכְבְּסֵנִי וּמִשְׁלֵן אֶלְבִּין:		3	3	3
	Total, v. 9		6	= 3	+ 3 = 0 + 6
10	תִּשְׁמִיעֵנִי שְׁשׁוֹן וְשִׁמְחָה	9	3	3	3
	תִּגְלָנָה עֲצָמוֹת דְּבִית:		3	3	3
	Total, v. 10		6	= 3	+ 3 = 0 + 6
11	הִסְתַּר פָּנָיו מִחֲטָאֵי ⁶	10	3	3	3
	וְכָל-עוֹנְתֵי מַחָה:		3	3	3
	Total, v. 11		6	= 3	+ 3 = 0 + 6
	Strophe 4	Total, v. 9-11	18	= 9	+ 9 = 0 + 18
12	Middle cola, לֵב טָהוֹר בְּרָא-לִי אֱלֹהִים ⁷	11	5	5	5
	וְרוּחַ נָכוֹן חִדַּשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי:		4	4	4
	42 = 20 + 2 + 20		9	= 5	+ 4 = 0 + 9
	Total, v. 12		3	3	3
13	Middle word of psalm: אֶל-תִּשְׁלִיכֵנִי מִלְּפָנָיו ⁸	12	3	3	3
	וְרוּחַ קִדְשְׁךָ אֶל-תִּקַּח מִמֶּנִּי:		5	5	5
	Total, v. 13		8	= 3	+ 5 = 0 + 8
	Total, v. 12-13		17	= 8	+ 9 = 0 + 17
14	הִשִּׁיבָה לִּי שְׁשׁוֹן וְשִׁעָרָה	13	4	4	4
	וְרוּחַ נְדִיבָה תִּסְמְכֵנִי:		3	3	3
	Total, v. 14		7	= 4	+ 3 = 0 + 7
	Strophe 5	Total, v. 12-14	24	= 12	+ 12 = 0 + 24
	Central core Canto II	Total, v. 9-14	42	= 21	+ 21 = 0 + 42
	on verseline level: 20 = 7 + 6 + 7	Total, v. 3-14	85	= 49	+ 36 = 43 + 42
15	אֶלְמָדָה פִּשְׁעִים דִּרְכֶּיהָ	14	3	3	3
	וְחֲטָאִים אֵלֶיהָ יָשׁוּבוּ:		3	3	3
	Strophe 6	Total, v. 15	6	= 3	+ 3 = 6 + 0
	Total, v. 3-15		91	= 52	+ 39 = 49 + 42

16	הַצִּילֵנִי מִדְּמִים אֱלֹהִים	15	3	3	3
	אֱלֹהֵי הַשְׁוֹעָתִי		2	2	2
	תִּרְנֶנָּה לְשׁוֹנֵי צִדְקָתְךָ:		3	3	3
	Total, v. 16		8	= 5 + 3	= 8 + 0
17	אֲדֹנִי שְׁפָתַי תִּפְתָּח	16	3	3	3
	וּפִי יִגִּיד תְּהִלָּתְךָ:		3	3	3
	Total, v. 17		6	= 3 + 3	= 6 + 0
	Strophe 7 Total, v. 16-17		14	= 8 + 6	= 14 + 0
	Canticle III.1 Total, v. 15-17		20	= 11 + 9	= 20 + 0
18	כִּי לֹא־תִחַפֵּץ זִבַּח וְאַתְנָה	17	5	5	5
	עוֹלָה לֹא תִרְצֶה:		3	3	3
	Total, v. 18		8	= 5 + 3	= 8 + 0
19	זִבְחֵי אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ נְשָׁבֶרָה	18	4	4	4
	לִב־נִשְׁבָּר וְנִדְבָה		3	3	3
	אֱלֹהִים לֹא תִבְזֶה:		3	3	3
	Total, v. 19		10	= 7 + 3	= 10 + 0
	Canticle III.2 Strophe 8 Total, v. 18-19		18	= 12 + 6	= 18 + 0
	Total, v. 7-19		93	= 51 + 42	= 51 + 42
	Total, v. 3-19		123	= 72 + 51	= 81 + 42
20	הִשְׁתַּיְכָה בְּרִצּוֹנְךָ אֶת־צִיּוֹן	19	4	4	4
	תִּבְנֶה חֳמוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם:		3	3	3
	Total, v. 20		7	= 4 + 3	= 7 + 0
21	אֲזִי תִחַפֵּץ זִבְחֵי־צֶדֶק עוֹלָה וְכִלְיָל	20	6	6	6
	אֲזִי יַעֲלוּ עַל־מִזְבִּיחְךָ פָּרִים:		5	5	5
	Total, v. 21		11	= 6 + 5	= 11 + 0
	Canticle III.3 Strophe 9 Total, v. 20-21		18	= 10 + 8	= 18 + 0
	Canto III Total, v. 15-21		56	= 33 + 23	= 56 + 0
	Total, v. 3-21		141	= 82 + 59	= 99 + 42
	With the heading, v. 1-21		153	= 89 + 64	

Observations

- The middle word אֵל, 'not', in v. 13a (141 = 70 + 1 + 70), cannot possibly be regarded as a meaningful centre. Such a centre is to be found on colon level: the two middle cola of v. 12 (42 = 20 + 2 + 20), which are a most appropriate expression of the gist of this prayer of contrition.

לֵב טָהוֹר בְּרֹא־לִי אֱלֹהִים וְרוּחַ נָכוֹן חֲדַשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי

Create in me a pure heart, O God, // and renew within me a steadfast spirit.

The meaningful centre falls within the central core on verseline level, vs. 9-14, the middle canto, surrounded by 14 verselines, with 7 on either side (20 = 7 + 6 + 7), which is significantly made up of 42 words (3 x 14, the numerical value of David).

2. As in quite a number of psalms, Psalm 51 has a second meaningful centre in a subsection of the text: in this case, in Canto I (vs. 3-8), the prayer of contrition, where the verb **הִטָּאתִי**, 'I have sinned' (v. 6a), is positioned at the arithmetic centre, surrounded by **42** words, with **21** (3 x 7) on either side (43 = 21 + 1 + 21). Note that the verb **תְּהַטְּאֵנִי**, 'purge me' ('de-sin me'), is the very first word of the **42**-word prayer for purification in Canto II. The root **הִטָּא**, 'sin', is clearly a keyword of paramount importance. It is not surprising to see that it occurs exactly **7** times in the prayer.

In light of this and the fact that the psalm as a whole is made up of **42** (6 x 7) cola, and that there are **7** references to God, we have to conclude that the author used the number **7** as a compositional device to highlight the keyword 'sin', and to express symbolically the 'fullness' of the speaker's confession of sin and guilt.

3. In an earlier analysis, I found four cantos, based on distinct facets of the prayer:

Canto I	vs. 3-8	Confession of guilt and prayer for forgiveness
Canto II	vs. 9-14	Prayer for purification and restoration (central core)
Canto III	vs. 15-19	Prayer for help to teach sinners and proclaim God's praise
Canto IV	vs. 20-21	Show favour to Zion and delight in the right sacrifices.

However, Van der Lugt (manuscript not yet published) has convinced me that the psalm has a tripartite structure based on rhetorical considerations:

Canto I	vs. 3-8	with 7 verselines and 14 cola
Canto II	vs. 9-14	with 6 verselines and 12 cola (central core)
Canto III	vs. 15-21	with 7 verselines and 16 cola.

I only differ from him in dividing Canto III into 3 canticles, vs. 15-17, 18-19 and 20-21, and taking vs. 20-21, Canticle III.3, as a coda. It clearly stands apart from the main body of the poem as a concluding prayer in which Zion and Jerusalem are explicitly brought into the picture. It is anything but a later addition, as many scholars maintain. Compare the coda in Psalm 50 – see Observation 4 in my Analysis of [Psalm 50](#).

The coda clearly refers back to the theme of Psalm 50, the right sacrifices. This strongly suggests that the Asaphite Psalm was consciously chosen and adapted to form a bridge between the Korahite psalms (42-49) and the Davidic psalms (51-65). See my Analysis of Psalm 50 and "The Compositional Structure of [Book II](#)."

4. Seeing the consistent use of the number **7** as structuring device, the divine name numbers merely serve to weave God's name into the fabric of the text. They feature only in the second half of the psalm:

vs. 12-13	17 words in total
vs. 3-14	85 (5 x 17) words in total
vs. 3-15	52 (3 x 26) words before atnach
vs. 7-19	51 (3 x 17) words before atnach
vs. 3-19	51 (3 x 17) words after atnach
vs. 1-21	153 (9 x 17 , and the summation of 1- 17) words in total.

5. The name YHWH is absent but **אֱלֹהִים**, 'God', occurs 6x (vs. 3, 12, 16a, 16b, 19a, 19b) and **אֲדֹנָי**, 'my Lord', once (v. 17), giving **7** references to God.

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